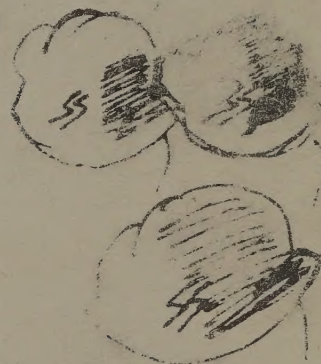
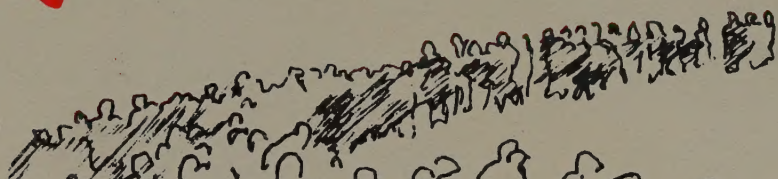
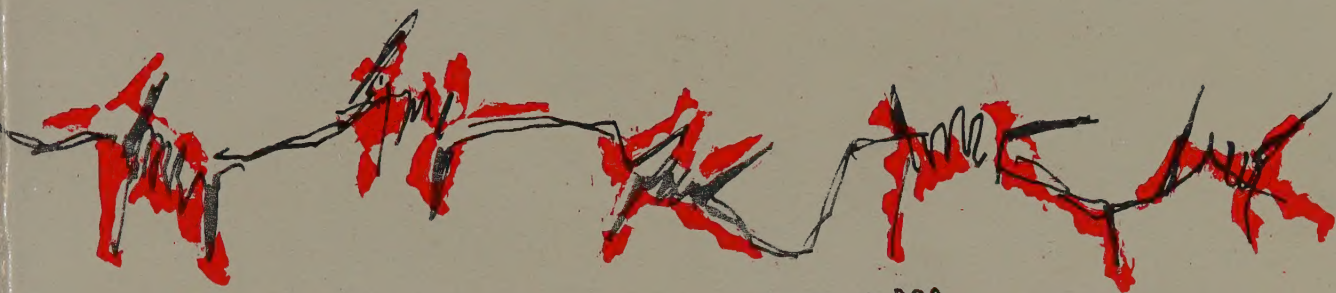




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By Kery

I've Been Chosen

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Iby Kery

I'VE BEEN CHOSEN

To my Dear Cousins
Eva and Tibor
with love Iby.

1. Aug. 1986
SYDNEY.

I dedicate this book to my dear children; Anne, Robert and Judy, with appreciation for their being as they are and for having made my life as colourful and rich as it is.

I make special remembrance on the 40th Anniversary of the Liberation of Death Camps, to the memory of their grandparents; Marton & Piroska Kessler, nee Fisher; Joseph & Helena Grun, nee Berger.

All four died in their early forties, victims of the Holocaust.

Finally, for my wonderful grandchildren Rachel, Alexander, Daniel, Jessica and Jeremy.

To remember, forgive, but never forget.

Iby Kery

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PREFACE

....Years ago in kindergarten, when a little friend said she was going to visit her grandmother, my four-year old daughter Anne, wondered aloud; "Is she going to visit the grandmother from the story of "Little Red Riding Hood?"

I tried to explain to her how the different generations fall into one family unit, but she did not understand. My heart sank when she innocently asked. "If many people have two grandmothers, how come I have none?" "I'll tell you later", I said, "when you're older".

That "later" has never come. Whether the time was never right, or I did not feel right speaking about it, I don't know. But I am certain now, when I probe the old sore, after all these years the wound is still bleeding, and even if it finally heals with time, a deep scar will remain.

INTRODUCTION

Recently when somebody suggested to me that I should write my memoirs of the concentration camps, I thought at first that it would be too painful to recall, and that the subject was already overwritten. But my dear friend Junette suggested, "Write some of your humorous experiences", that seemed a good idea.

I do not think that any part of the experience was humorous in the sense of inducing laughter. There was nothing funny or comical there ; contradictions perhaps, the human in the inhuman situation. Through some of it sounds incredible, it is all true; it happened to me.

I am a "closet writer" who stores unpublished articles in the drawer. As much as I would like them to be published, seldom I do , anything about it. This is different. I was determined to be in print. The obstacles on the way have strengthened my determination, though there were painful incidents.

I was born in Hungary, and English is my second language, but in my writing I use many German expressions,

which means working with three languages. My recurrent mistakes with the tenses, mixing the adverbs and adjectives worried me; but my greatest worry was the style of writing. It was a continuous conflict. Had I the skill to fulfil the self-imposed role, or should I forget about it?

To write a scholarly article is beyond me. Yet once I had set the ball rolling it bounced along so that I could not have stopped, even if I had wished to. In the International Youth Year, I thought my experience might give useful guide in forming the future of the younger generation, by reminding them of what had happened only forty years ago, in the enlightened age of civilization in the middle of the twentieth century, when millions were systematically annihilated, because of their religious belief, while almost the whole world stayed ignorant.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to many dear friends, especially to those who were ready and willing to "lend me an ear", and the reassurance and supportive encouragement that always eased my suffering; to my dear family for their patience when I pestered them with endless questions; and last but not least, to my husband who was often impatient and angry with my lack of knowledge of

grammar. His rigorous criticism, though biting at times, nevertheless helped me overcome many of my difficulties.

Iby Kery

REFLECTION I

LOST & FOUND

Left, right-right, left,
right-right, murmured the dance master
rhythmically , as he commanded the
class.

Left, right-right, left, right-
right, clumsy feet went tapping on the
parquet floor. It was my first
dancing lesson in the course at the
Dance Studio in Debrecen. January
1944 showed on the calendar.

Around the walls of the room ,
chairs were placed and my cousin, ten
years my senior was sitting next to
the window. Patiently she sat through
the first lesson - as well the other
fourteen. At that time it was not
thought proper for a young girl to go
out at night without a chaperone.

Now it seems ludicrous - at such a
critical time in history, with
antisemitism wide-spread - to be
taking dancing lessons. Living with
my aunt, cousin and her two children
(her husband was away at labour camps)
perhaps for me it was just a reason to
get out of the house, an escape from
the everyday burden and worries of the
insecure future.

By the time the fifteen lessons were completed all over clumsy feet had become less clumsy, and some had even come under control.

"Guess what?" asked a boy on the last lesson. He was often my partner and responsible for the good times I had had. "You were chosen as best dancer. You'll win a trophy -you had the highest number of votes". And I was thrilled. He wanted to know my family name, as he knew only my first name. Later as the night progressed, Mr. Havacsek thanked and congratulated the members of the class. Then he announced that the best dancer of the group was: EVA SZABO.

I was deeply shocked. Had I not had been told beforehand, I would not have expected anything. I was disillusioned and hurt, yet I did not know the reason. I wanted to know the truth so I pestered my partner and eventually, despite his embarrassment, he told me: "With a name like "Grun" a girl could not be announced as the winner".

★ ★

FIRST KISS

My world was shattered .We heard Hitler screaming his hatred for Jews to the world. We knew Jews were being hit hard, stripped, kicked, ridiculed all over Europe. In his final solution Hitler would kill them in order to purify his master race. But I did not believe it would happen to us. Not in Hungary. It couldn't happen here, I felt sure, a belief shared by many others.

A young air force officer asked me to dance at the studio at our last lesson. Aside from the fact, he was good looking and elegant, he was also an accomplished dancer. In the middle of a tango he invited me to a ball. He said politely he would be delighted if I would be able to go. As odd as it may seem now, I accepted the invitation.

Everything seemed so rosy for a while that I was living in a dream world. There was a shortage of goods, but I managed to find a piece of floral crepe de chine for a new dress for the occasion.

When the Saturday finally arrived, I could scarcely swallow my food all day.

It was a beautiful night. I had a little wine and it was not too long before I was tipsy. My feet were so light, I flew to the tune of the La Paloma. We danced a foxtrot to the music of Alexanders Ragtime Band and while we waltzed he whispered in my ear. The band played the Blue Danube. It was a beautiful night. We walked home, a fair distance, though it seemed to taken onlt a few minutes. There was a blackout and the night was pitch dark. I was dizzy when we stop- ped at the front gate. My cousin ope- ned the door. I felt a light kiss on my lips. The first kiss ever.

My friend had arranged to pick me up the next morning at ten o'clock and we had planned a morning swim in the nearby indoor pool. He did not turn up at ten, eleven, or twelve o'clock. He didn't even ring.

That night of the nineteenth of March, 1944, the radio announced "Germany has invaded Hungary". The silence that followed the announcement cut deeply into many Jewish hearts --and some not Jewish, as well.

Later my handsome airforce officer rang, and come again to see me, but the magic had gone. By coincidence, I met him on the street some time later when I was wearing the yellow star and he looked the other way. I lifted my head up and proudly looked straight ahead....to nothing.

TURNING POINT

I was 6 years old - the oldest of four children, (2 boys and 2 girls) - when my sister was born. I had been staying with my aunt and her family for a few weeks and my youngest cousin who was ten years older than me, loved and spoiled me. The night my father came to collect me, my cousin put me to bed quickly and told me to pretend to be sleep, so I did , and I was not awakened. This event proved to be a turning point in my life.

For the next ten years when my parents moved to the country , I stayed with my aunt and her family to finish my schooling. I was homesick and tremendously happy to go home for a holiday and see my parents, brothers and sister, but by the time the holiday was over, I was equally happy to go back to my dear second family.

My mother was heartbroken that I was so eager to leave her and go back to my aunt. She said many times that if she had known beforehand she would never have agreed to this arrangement. I think I can understand her now. Perhaps she thought I deprived her of that love that I felt for my aunty's

family. But it was not so, I loved her dearly. Perhaps she never knew how often I was homesick and how happy I was every time I saw her again.

**

Through having two homes I was also fortunate in having two different upbringings. Although from time to time this caused clashes in my emotions, it gave me a broader outlook in life.

My parents led an orthodox Jewish life. Aunty's family was not so religious, though they kept the high holy-days, had a kosher home, and paid their dues. On the other hand, their shop was open on Saturdays, they mixed with gentiles, and were more assimilated into life around them.

They were "Great Hungarians" whereas my parents were Zionists. During my high school years I mixed with Zionist youths. I went to their meetings, I was involved with Hashomer Hazair. Advisedly enough, I did not mention it at my aunty's house, for they would not have approved.

At my parent's home everybody listened with open mouth and ears when I talked about my experiences with the

Zionist movement. My dear Scripture Teacher was one of the men who made the first (possibly the only) Hungarian-Hebrew- English Dictionary: Mor Mannheim & Ezra Gross. (Mannheim later became Moshe Ishbethi, in Israel). He was a war hero in the First World War, therefore his family was exempted from the ghetto. When the war came, this proved to be a disaster.

At the first air raid, while they were sheltering in the basement they were upset by anti-Semitic comments and decided to leave. While they were walking up the stairs, the house was hit and flattened by a bomb. The people below were saved.

★ ★

I attended two Jewish private schools, primary and high. The Jewish High School for Girls had classes only to intermediate level, but in the late thirties there was an extra year added for young ladies, a type of finishing school year, that only lasted for a short while. When the war broke out, the girl's high school building was requisitioned by the army. The last half year of my schooling was finished in the Jewish Boy's High.

I was a good student and rather obedient a curious kind amongst the top pupils. Mischievousness did not give me pleasure, partly because I was conscientious, and because the discomfort of having done something wrong was a great burden.

Studying was easy for me; I was diligent, a good observer and blessed with an exceptional memory. I always did my homework as long as it had to be done in writing. However I was able to give a correct answer without consulting my schoolbooks. My drawing ability also helped me to be in a special category, which to a certain extent influenced my future.

Because everything came easily for me, I did not learn (till later) that if you want something, you have to work for it, and work hard. Therefore I didn't have the willpower to go on and continue my studies. At that time, in that society, women- particularly Jewish women- were not considered the equal of men, and I lacked determination and ambition.

★ ★

IN JAIL

In the late thirties my parents moved to Sarospatak, a beautifully located country town. The Bodrog River ran through the centre of the town and the tall hills were covered with vineyards. Distant mountains garlanded the small city. I spent my holidays there and have many happy memories but somehow that place has always stayed remote for me, while the word Debrecen still warms my heart.

Sarospatak was almost a border town, near to Satoraljaújhely, which was cut in half by the Trianon Peace Treaty after the First World War. The north of Great Hungary was converted to Slovakia and became Czechoslovakia in 1939-40, when Hitler collaborated with the Hungarians. Part of this territory was given back to Hungary and a similar arrangement was made with part of Romania and Yugoslavia.

Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Germans on the 28th September 1939. The Jews were taken to concentration camps all over Europe. Many people escaped and made their way to the

south, where they hoped to survive. Many were killed in the process.

The homes of Jews were raided, especially in towns like Sarospatak which were close to the border. Suddenly a Nationality Certificate was needed for every Jew. By the time we realised what was happening, it was too late.

My mother and father and their forefathers for generations had been born in Hajdu Megye, the county situated in central Hungary (nicknamed "Mammeland" by people who lived on the annexed territory). If we had still been living there, there would have been no problem in getting the papers. In a small town or village the Christian and Jewish communities had known each other's families for many generations.

As newcomers to Sarospatak, with no relatives, we were refused those certificates; the attitude of the Government was so anti-Semitic, that our application was not heeded. You either received the papers or you did not, and that was it.

My father went to Budapest and hired a solicitor there, but the case proceeded very slowly and cost a lot of money.

We woke up one Sunday morning in 1942 and heard the bad news - thirty families who had no papers were collected in the county jail. The same afternoon they were taken away from Sarospatak to Kamanec-Podolyski, in Poland. There they had to dig a large hole and they were shot in their common grave.

There lived a Sefaredim family in Sarospatak. The woman's late husband had been a Polish citizen, and she had remarried. From her first marriage she had three beautiful daughters. From the second she had a little boy, and she was seven months pregnant.

The gendarmes took the three girls from their home that morning, and the mother hysterically went to the Catholic priest saying that she would kill herself there if she didn't get her daughters back. These three girls were freed before the group was taken away.

A week later on a Saturday afternoon, my father and brothers came home from the Synagogue with the frightening news; "Tomorrow - a Sunday again - the Jewish homes will be raided for another thirty families". The news was shattering. Our hearts were gripped with fear, we knew we must be included.

My parents were up before sunrise. I woke to the terrible noise of the gendarmes' boots striking the cobble stones in the front yard. Four large grim-faced men with cock feathers in their hats rapped loudly on the door of our home at four a.m. They gave us a few minutes to dress and gather a few belongings.

We were led to the backyard at the Council building and then to the jail. For the first time I was in a dirty jail with its rotten smell. It was a bug ridden place with bloodmarks on the wall , a great shock for me.

At that time, mail was delivered to homes everyday except Sundays. But Sunday afternoon between two and four o'clock anyone who wanted to could pick up their mail at the Post Office.

It happened on that day, that my uncle, then only my aunt's fiance, who was serving in the army, was stationed in the nearby village and heard that we were taken away from our home. He found and reassured us. "Don't worry, I'll get you out". First he went to the Post Office to pick up our mail, almost automatically, just to gain a little time to think. Yes, we had a letter from the Ministry of Interior. It was a note with our Certificate of Nationalisation. My uncle ran to the Government office , waving the note and we were freed....

INVASION

When the Germans occupied Hungary in the county of Zemplen (including Sarospatak) the situation for Jews turned extremely bad. The degradation started with confiscation of radios, and many autocratic laws were passed. While I was in Debrecen my parents, brothers and sister were taken to the ghetto at Satoraljaujhely on the last night of Pesach. Once I received a letter from them, but the parcel I sent came back. The food had become mouldy.

Later I learnt that they were taken to Auschwitz in early May. My mother and my sister, thirteen year old Magda, were sent (to the left side) straight into the gaschambers. My father and the two boys were sent to the "right". Later, with a further selection, my younger brother was parted from them.

My two brothers survived, in different circumstances, but my father collapsed under the burden of physical and mental strain and was taken to hospital, where the next day he passed away.

In the year of 1943, through a friend of a friend, I got a job at Fabian's Haute Couture Salon, in Debrecen. Here - in a relatively short time - I developed a skill that was recognised and paid well.

I have to mention that, at a time when anti-Semitism was rife, the people there were really humane. I, the only person with a yellow star, did not feel any discrimination or degradation while I was working there. Eventually I had to stop the work, when we were confined to the ghetto.

★ ★

Our situation worsened in the ghetto and worsened further when we were transferred to the Brick-Works. There, inhumane injustice gradually lowered our physical and spiritual strength; however it strengthened our dignity. Those times were shocking. We did not know what was to come, but we thought it could not be worse.

When the first transport was taken away from the Brick-Yard we were frightened; but when the second was

going and we were still left behind we felt some hope. Perhaps we were hoping naively, that the war would end before they came back for us , or were just happy to stay (as odd as it may sound now) a moment longer on Hungarian soil. Had they known otherwise, my poor aunty, cousin and two nieces, might still be alive now ; because the first two transports went to Austria, the only camps where families were allowed to stay together.

★★

AUSCHWITZ - BIRKENAU

FAIR EXCHANGE?!

The wheels squeaked suddenly as the cattle train came to a halt. One hundred and twenty human livestock were thrust to one side.

From the far corner, where I was originally placed, I was jostled to the centre of the car and stranded opposite the door. The back wall actually served as a door also, unseen before, but opened now from outside—and I was standing there in front, amongst the first few to breathe in the welcome fresh air.

My head was still filled with worries, hopelessness, moaning and wailing, cries of pain—voices of all ages from a four month old to an eight-six year old.

It was daylight, but everything seemed grey. It could have been dawn, early morning, or any hour of an overcast day.

"Where are we?" someone asked, an echo of my own thoughts. Curious, grey, tired, old faces were everywhere. The journey had lasted for several days, in circumstances that would have been too cruel for the most ferocious animals, let alone for humans.

But now amongst the first, I lifted up the fetid portable W.C. and gave it to a man in striped pyjamas. As soon as I jumped off the wagon I took my eighteen months old little niece, while my cousin followed me out.

Numerous SS men and women – not unusual by now – swarmed around us, like ants, assisted by striped uniformed prisoners.

"Where are we?" we asked.

"Auschwitz" – "Oschwizim"

"I never heard of it – in Poland"
We had travelled through two borders, taken from Debrecen, a Hungarian country town, through Czechoslovakia, to Poland. Why?!"

"It is a concentration camp!"

"For what?!" Unexpectedly the man in the striped uniform was about to tell me something: "Geben sie das kind ihre Mutter!", (Give the child to your mother).

An obedient dutiful soul I – or a hypocrite who always did what she was supposed to – I gave her to my aunt, who was also her grandmother. "Probably the young people will be taken to work", I guessed from previous experience.

I even felt a slight happiness. To be finished with that miserable journey, to be able to breathe the fresh air and to stretch my legs was a welcome relief, even of only momentary for an eighteen year old. But despite the pleasure there was uneasiness.

At the front of the column, the sad, helpless, despondent captives and their captors became quieter. About 200 hundred metres further, at the end of the line, a strong "SS" Officer pulled me out from the crowd and pushed me to the right side. Instantly I was separated from my family who all went to the left, straight into the gas chambers.

Later I learned that the "SS" officer, the exterminator of Auschwitz-Birkenau was Dr. Mengele himself. I never had the chance, nor did I try to find out who the man in the striped uniform was. Certainly he was a key figure in my fate.

Or was it a fair exchange? I gave him a mobile toilet filled with excrement and he saved my life

ARBEIT MACHT FREI!

Everyone marched silently. We did not know where the next step would lead. We were very much afraid - our hearts pounded heavily, almost as loud as the "SS" footsteps tramping in the mud.

Constant shouting - "Los - Los", broke the monotony.

Fences were everywhere, electrically charged fences, and SS officers with dogs.

We arrived at a huge iron gate. Big letters proclaimed the cliché "Arbeit Macht Frei", (Work Liberates). Surely, there never was a statement more deceitful!

As we were led into a building, we were told to remove our clothes along with all personal belongings, and make them into one bundle, which we would be able to collect later.

Lies again - the exit was situated at the rear of the bath-block.

Before we entered the shower, the last "Gold-Call" was announced. If anybody had kept some gold, he should deposit it at once.

Most of us had parted from our jewellery long ago. Harsh punishment

had been promised so often that noone would take the risk of holding back a single piece, even for sentimental value.

Inside my handbag were a few documents: my school reports and some photographs, useless to others, dear to me.

Stripped of my last remnants of clothing and sentiment. I was humiliated and hurt...angry at the injustice that one man can do to another.

I stood there, stark naked, with my head shaven, I had nothing. Then and there I understood what my mother had meant when she used to ask: "Did you do your homework?" checking up on me. "You are not studying for anybody else you know, you are learning for yourself."

I realised at that moment that I had nothing less than I had ever had before, because the only value one can call one's own is "knowledge" something intangible. Its ownership cannot be shifted by changeable man-made laws. It is not materialistic. It is untouchable by thieves.

The sole value I had, was my eighteen years experience, my "knowledge", as little as it was. That was mine.

The love and pain that I felt then
was mine, it exists still in my heart.
Nobody can take that away. It will
stay with me as long as I live.

Deep in my heart I have always
believed in life and survival. I have
never given up hope.

★ ★

BIRKENAU

After the bath, we were outfitted with strange rags that did not fit very well at all.

The comical side of the distribution of clothing was that often a tall person would get a very short dress. I myself, being shortish got a long warm knitted skirt, with a blouse.

Then, for about twenty minutes, we were marched to our future "residence" B III Vernichtungslager. "B" for Birkenau, No. 3, Vernichtungslager, "annihilating camp", also means a storage place, a kind of supplier of the crematoriums.

What we found there was beyond our wildest imagination. We saw moving skinny bone-collections, balded creatures in dirty rags -men or women? we could not figure out.

Everything was earth coloured. The people, the barracks, the ground. There was no sign of life. Nowhere a green leaf or a blade of green grass to rest the eyes, just mud and bare earth.

To our surprise most of the inhabitants spoke Hungarian, and as we soon found out, for several weeks they

had been arriving continually from Hungary.

We were accommodated in Block 7. The Revier, Hospital was Block No. 8. This building had glass in the windows. In a short time , when I saw my reflection in the window of Block No. 8 , to my amazement I looked the same as those people who had arrived a few weeks earlier.

Later we found friends among the old and newcomers. They taught us how the system in the Lager worked. The hierarchy was made up of the Capo, the Lagerälteste, the Blockälteste, and Stubendienst. All were prisoners, hardened by time and weather; suffering from famine and torture. Often they had had to kill their parents in order to save their own lives.

We were told about "Zahl-Appell" - the "roll call" that occurred twice daily: in the early hours of the morning when it was freezing cold, and in the early hours of the afternoon when the sun was unbearable.

We had to stand five in a row, till the counting tallied. We had to be quick to make up the line, otherwise we were slapped, struck either by bare hands or leather straps, or with lashes on our faces or any other part which they could reach. We expected

"roll call" to occur at any hour of the day.

If the result of counting did not match with the number of occupants , the panic and loud shouting indicated that we were in trouble. Everyone had to blame a subordinate in the hierarchy. Occasionally the "SS" shot into the crowd; someone took a bullet just to set an example.

Once a person was made to run into the electrified fence. He was left hanging there for days, to set an example.

We heard about the prisoner, the only one who ever escaped from Auschwitz in an "SS" uniform. She was an old inmate who belonged to the elite crew. She was well known and helped by many others in the plot. Unfortunately she was caught in Holland and brought back to be executed.

We were sometimes fed with stories which were partly rumours. After a while we were unable to distinguish rumours from real events. It was cruel, unbelievable and obscure.

Slowly we developed our own smoke screen as a kind of protector. What was happening in front of our eyes we did not always believe as reality.

NEEDLE POINT

After a few hours of being a resident in Lager B.III, the clouds above dispersed and the naked sun flooded us with scorching heat.

My long knitted skirt stored the heat, therefore it seemed a good idea to cut my skirt shorter and use the piece to cover my head.

I was walking along and playing with my thoughts, I saw two women, one sewing, the other with a familiar face. Hesitantly, I asked the woman sewing if she would lend me the needle.

The familiar face straight away supported my case with the remark that she knew me from the "ghetto". As soon as I heard her voice I remembered seeing her there also.

Later I learned they were sisters, Anna and Gitta. They had escaped from Michalovce (Czechoslovakia) when the Jews were taken to Auschwitz. They were hidden in Debrecen for four years. Now there were only a handful of survivors from their hometown. One of their old friends had presented them with the needle and a small knife.

They lent me the needle and left it with me. Soon after they left, a school friend of mine with her mother appeared and wanted to borrow it. At first I refused: "It is not mine," I said, but I could not resist their beggings.

I handed the precious implement to my friend, on the condition that I would stay with them, until their work was done. Just before they finished the job, I heard a faint "Aah", and realised that the needle had broken.

My friend and her mother were really sorry, apologised and walked away.

I stayed there, sitting on the rock by myself with the heavy burden. How would I be able to repay the sisters for the kindness and trust, that they had shown me?

"Here is the little girl" Anna said with a boisterous voice. Then as she looked into my face, she changed to a more sober tone.

"You lost the needle".

"No. I did not lose it. It has broken. "But I ... I will buy one. Perhaps for one portion of bread ... ". Then Anna, boisterous again, "No way

We won't let you give up your one day's bread for a needle. We'll try to get another one. "Would you like to join us as a permanent fifth", they asked.

By that time we had experienced what "Zahl-Appell" meant. It had become common to form a permanent five. The fives stayed together day and night. If any unexpected "Appell" occurred, they were always ready.

The least I could do was to join them. They became my family, and I was not alone anymore. Anna, the older one, was a mother figure, she protected me and I was grateful.

I never forgot the humanitarian gesture of these two generous people who had lived for years as escapees before I was deported. I believe that in the hard and inhuman conditions under which we lived the "negatives" become more pronounced in many personalities. But in the case of Anna and Gitta the good inclinations came to the fore.

Fortunately, I stayed with the sisters right through our internment and we were only parted when the Slovaks were transported back at an earlier date. I only knew that they left Hungary. I did not know their

whereabouts until two years ago, when
my brother met them in Israel.

Now - after all these years - I
can hardly wait to see them again.

★★

DROPS OF RAIN

Barrack 7 was made out of timber, like the others. But unlike the others, this barrack was divided into rooms, by a corridor in the centre, with doorways each side.

The rooms were empty, bare, no beds. We were laid on the floor in lines without mattresses or cover. The only protection was our one layer of clothing.

We had to sleep like sardines in a tin, on one side, until the whole group turned to their other side.

Following the afternoon Zahl-Appell (roll call) in broad daylight we were confined to our room.

It was curfew till morning. We had no light in the barracks, only the Stubendienst (the room elders, lowest ranking in the hierarchy) had a torch.

We used to have our dinner handed out to us in the room.

One portion of bread was the size of about a quarter of a mud-like brick, accompanied by a small piece of sausage. The dinner was the most delicious meal of the day, but it was so scanty it was merely enough to prevent us from dying of hunger.

We could never figure out which was the better solution, to eat it in one lump, or divide it into several meals.

One of us managed to cut seven slices out of the small allowance of bread, with a borrowed knife. Thin as a knife blade, it was hardly enough to even taste.

Before we went to sleep, we often talked about our favourite memories from childhood. Some of us used to sing something sad, or recite something nostalgically from the past. Seldom did we talk about the future. Bleak as it seemed, we were hopeful, dreaming about the end of the war, and how we would be liberated.

We even had news about the attack on Hitler's life, but we did not know the outcome.

One night I was sleeping and freezing at the same time. I felt drops of water rhythmically falling on my side. I almost turned unconsciously, then gaining full control of my thoughts I decided it would not be wise to move. Enduring the raindrops until my stomach had cramps, I sat up carelessly for a moment. Somebody stretched out her legs and kicked me. In a flash I was on my two feet.

The person next to me was responsible for what happened next.

In her sleep, probably moving unconsciously, she became aware of the available space and turned onto her back. First, I tried to regain some territory, but that was impossible. I had to reconcile myself to spending the rest of the night standing up.

I was sad and angry. I had enough time to realise that the immediate subjects of my anger were really my fellow victims- and were as innocent as I was. I should have blamed the greater force behind it all. I thought that the whole of society must be responsible, to have allowed this to happen. I was not able to understand how man could ignite the fire of hell, and gain such power - to be able to authorise life and death.

★ ★

A WAVE OF HUMAN SEA

Typical weather in Auschwitz, in the summer of 1944, was either unbearable heat, or freezing cold, with frequent showers. Insufficient clothing and food emphasised our sufferings.

We had our breakfast in the morning, after "Zahl-Appell", a so-called coffee. Nevertheless it was liquid. It served its purpose, because we had no drinking water readily available in Lager B.III.

Once a day, in the morning hours a tank of water was delivered. As soon as the carriers transferred it into a rusty basin the water was caught, stolen, or pinched by any means possible.

Regardless of punishment, no discipline could ever be maintained near the water tank.

Frequently for breakfast we had a kind of grain made into a runny porridge that tasted like glue. Some people would wisely eat everything they could get, some even raved about it loudly. I don't know whether they tried to convince others or themselves.

For me , the "porridge" was the hardest to swallow, even more repulsive than the "Durgemuse". "Durgemuse" was the name of the soup we received for lunch. It was like pig swill, a mere dishwater that one would be reluctant to feed to an animal.

Between the two "Appells", we were not allowed to go into the barrack, rain or shine, except during heavy storms. By the time, we were able to get inside, we were already soaking wet.

We used to stand close to one another, to keep our body heat within the group. And we would talk and talk about food, our favourite delicacies. How we would -or how our mothers used to -make them. We gave each other the recipes. In our imagination we feasted at dinner parties. Sometimes we planned the jubilee of our liberation. Somehow, the mutual dreaming helped us withstand the cold wind and the rain.

Huddling together, after a while the crowd would begin to move slowly from left to right, right to left, repeatedly, standing in one place, moving rhythmically, like billowing wheat.

A wave of human sea.

TWO SLAPS

Regularly we were taken for a clean up and to be disinfected at either of the two bathhouses in Birkenau or Auschwitz.

We would have welcomed the well-deserved shower with pleasure, if the Damocles sword had not hung over our heads all the time.

We had all heard enough about the gaschambers and crematoriums, and had seen for ourselves the smoke coming from the chimneys during day time. We had also seen through the windows the flames that emerged from the chimneys at night. We never knew whether water or cyanide would flow through the shower rows.

Though we knew about the gas, and knew what had happened to our parents, yet we just could not believe it was true. Nevertheless we were frightened, worried, always reluctant to be near the bathhouses. We were even relieved, if only momentarily, to return safely to Lager B.III.

One day we were taken to Birkenau for the routine shower. The bath block was situated in the Lager nick-

named "Canada". That was the place where the new transports arrived everyday from all over Europe. All their collected belongings were stored in "Canada".

After the shower we did not get our own clothes back again, but other dirty rags. On the way out of the building we had a glimpse into the storeroom where striped-uniformed girls were sorting recently arrived clothing. Everything seemed so new, so clean and beautifully bright that it was a pleasure to look at. We asked the girls to give us some and, to our surprise, they threw us a few pieces. I caught a pink nightie. I had it in my hand and people around tried to take it away but Anna, my friend, came to my rescue, and bore witness that it was given to me.

With my new acquisition and together with Anna and Gitta, I happily walked back to the rest of the group.

Suddenly a "SS Aufseherine" and a "SS Unterscharfuhrer" appeared in front of us. The Unterscharfuhrer came straight to me, tore the bright and beautiful nightie out of my hand, and gave Anna a big slap on her face.

I will never understand how the "SS" mind worked. Perhaps we were already regarded as dead bodies with

no individual existence, desire or feeling. I was the one who had committed the offence, with evidence in my hand; for what possible reason was, my dear friend the one, to receive punishment?

Not long before, I, too, had felt the physical pain of a slap on my face, and the humiliation.

One day I had given in to my terrible thirst, and against my better judgement tried to steal a drink of water from the tank. I was hit in the face and felt as if all hell had broken loose. I decided then that if that was the price, I would have to learn to survive without water. Once, during my seven-week stay in Auschwitz, I drank from the swamp, but never again did I go even near the water tank.

★★

BURNING ALIVE

Once in August, we woke up in the middle of the night to the sounds of cries, moaning, shouting and barking of dogs. Outside in the dark of night we saw tongues of flame leaping frighteningly close to us, flames that did not come from the crematoriums. It was an uncontrollable fire. Very near us, people were burning alive. We felt the intensity of the heat; the nauseating smell of burning flesh and bone took our breath away. We clung close together, fear gripping our hearts as we awaited our turn!

I cannot remember how that night ended, but the following day we learned, that the terrible nightmare had been the burning of the "Ziganerlager".

★ ★

LOST TEETH

Every afternoon while standing in line, we saw a truck pull up in front of the hospital.

The barrack was emptied. The living and the dead were thrown together in the same van, often naked, skinny "musulmans", the term used as the last stage before death, and driven away to the crematorium.

We all understood that the hospital was dangerous. An unexpected "Appell" could occur at anytime.

One morning I woke up with a terrible toothache. Three days later when the pain was unbearable, I climbed through one of the back windows of the hospital, where the dentist was supposed to be.

The room was not much of a dentist's surgery, with very little equipment. But the dentist was a doctor from Kolozsvar, Romania, and first class in her profession. She did not want to pull my healthy front tooth out, but I begged her and she gave in to my pleading.

I endured it without anaesthetic or disinfectant, and I did not feel any extra pain beyond what I already had,- nor any less afterwards.

The next day I had to leap through the window again. The dentist had pulled out the wrong tooth. She got the right one on the second try. I lost two good front teeth, but my toothache finally disappeared.

★★

IN LIMBO

Unusually early one morning, we were led to the front square, where a selection was underway. We were obliged to stand naked in front of the judges.

Our hearts sank from fear and uncertainty. What was going to happen to us? Which of us would be taken out from the lager -and sent where?

We had witnessed many sad moments in the past, when two sisters, or a mother and daughter, were separated from each other. They cried and pleaded to be allowed to stay together, breaking our hearts. But the "SS" were merciless.

It often happened that one who was parted, tried to sneak back to the other side... and often succeeded too. But woe betide anyone who was noticed doing so.

Amongst a large group of people, we were led out of lager B.III forever. We walked a few yards and were left there to wait, in a sort of "no mans' land", for hours and hours. The August sun radiated scorching heat, and neither food nor drink was provided. From the movement of the

sun we tried to estimate the passage of time. Late afternoon came and went, and we were still in limbo. We thought with reason, that those were our last hours. We were meant to be killed, therefore nobody cared about us anymore.

Finally, almost at dawn, we were collected and led into a lager, to the bathhouse. There we were fed. "Durgemuse" still, though a much better quality than we ever had before. Someone even found a green pea in it.

The fact, that we had been given food raised new hopes in us. Perhaps we would be going to working camps; no one would waste such good food on candidates for the crematorium.

The bath was open, but people stood around outside the building, though the night turned extremely cold. The bathhouse consisted of two rooms: the shower room, and an other room filled with benches, ascending right up to the ceiling. In that room someone discovered the word "Gas" written above one door. That was enough to keep most of us outside the building for a while.

Our hearts were back in our throats again. Sadly we thought now we had had our last meal; that was why it had been so good. As the night progressed, the cold became severe. The better half of the crowd slowly trickled into the building, giving up, disregarding the likelihood of danger, not caring any more what might happen.

With similar feelings, I went into the shower and lay down on the wet floor. My dear friends tried to talk me out of it , with no result. I was asleep within seconds. When I woke and got up, the curve of my body had left a mark on the floor where the wet cement had dried with the heat of my body.

The next morning we went through another selection. Following that, we were outfitted with new grey uniforms and wooden clogs. Only then we realised with great relief, we were to be taken to working camps.

After a week's journey we arrived at our destination: LAGER MUNCHMUHLE, ALLENDORF, HESSEN, WEST GERMANY. And once again we were greeted by the cliché, in big letters over the entrance:

" ARBEIT MACHT FREI "

REFLECTIONS II

ALLENDORF

Our new camp was situated in the middle of the forest that surrounded the small village. That village showed no signs of war at all. There was no rubble and people even took the time to plant beds of flowers which garlanded the neat houses.

We thought we had arrived in Heaven and, to a certain extent, that was true compared to our previous conditions. It was a big step for a thousand women who had been hired to work in the nearby munition factories.

Our physical condition – the fact that we were so skinny and weakened – caused alarm and friction between the "SS" and the civilian, who were managing the factories. The decision was made to build up our strength. We were to have two weeks quarantine for recuperation. Our food improved greatly, we even had a glass of milk given every day, right through our stay in that lager. Rumour said that the milk was necessary to offset the poison that we worked with. The fact that our newly-growing hair was red – without exception –, indicated how poi-

sonous the chemicals must have been.

The lager commanders belonged to the "Wehrmacht", under "SS" supervision. The "SS" were out of sight for most of the time. We spent seven months in almost human conditions.

Seven women were taken away from the camp when their pregnancies became obvious and one middle-aged person died from natural causes and was buried at the nearby cemetery. The rest of us, precisely 992 persons out of the thousand, were liberated.

★ ★

MAKING BOMBS

We were worked hard in the two factories, B. and X. "Furstalle", day and night alternatively. Situated about eight miles into the forest and underground, the factories were so well hidden that air raids did not occur until almost the end of the war. We never saw daylight, regardless of the shift we were working. We suffered from hunger and cold, but there were no extra punishment imposed on us, perhaps because our governors were human enough, and only servants of the era.

Several times we had organised entertainment in the camp, with the nearby villagers sitting in the front rows. It was amazing just how many talented artists were amongst the thousand prisoners: singers, dancers, musicians, and those who worked behind the scenes, designers, costume makers and milliners. From time to time we felt the injustice of our situation and we were angry, but there were moments when we forgot everything and thoroughly enjoyed these exceptional performances. It was an affirmation of what was human in us. We had our very own feast of entertainment, beginning early in the winter months.

Under the leadership of an endearing lady, a middle-aged high school teacher (from Szombathely or Sopron) who organised these afternoons, we recited poems, from memory, to entertain each other. As time progressed, more and more poems came back to us until eventually we specialised in one poet at a time and so enjoyed Jozsef Attila, Kiss Jozsef and Ady Endre nights.

The group started with a few interested persons and was open to anyone who was enthusiastic. Later, the small room was crowded, the double bunks laden with people.

It seemed absurd. There we were, thrown out of our country, rejects, disowned by the nation – yet we were singing the praises of Hungarian poets, in the Hungarian language which we had learnt from our mothers. The only one we really knew.

Despite all paradoxes, those Sunday afternoons had a great effect on us, helping us to forget reality. I never missed any of those meetings, except when I worked the afternoon shift. I always attended, even when I had worked through the night.

FUGITIVES

The air raids became recurrent in the middle of March. We sensed something happening around us. We felt the panic – it seemed that insecurity was not only our privilege.

On the twenty-third of March 1945, we were marched out of the camp to the unknown future. Somehow we felt the war had to be ended soon, but the big question mark over our heads was, what will happen to us?

We were walking at night and rested by day, and spent our first day in a huge shed , crammed again like sardines.

The next night, following rumours, people stayed behind in the shed. I talked over the idea with Anna and Gitta and we decided to remain at our next rest.

Under the darkness of night we walked away from our captors, and found the route that led us to the forest. To our surprise , we met a group of eight people, friends who had lived in the same barrack at the camp.

We slept - all of us together -
under the stars in the wood. Later we
broke up into small groups , believing
that to be wiser. Then we bumped into
each other on a third occasion, and
decided it was our fate to stay
together. And so it proved to be!

Two persons in our group to whom I
felt myself closest are now my two
sisters-in-laws. As a result of our
friendship, I met and married their
brother, my husband now for forty
years.

★ ★

LIBERATION

On our third night as escapees, our request to sleep in the stable of a house was granted and there we had an unexpected encounter with the "SS". Two men came up to the gallery where we made our bed in the hay. They flooded us with questions and scared the hell out of us before they left. I believe, based on the happenings of the following day, they also were "escapees"!

During our escape we tried to stay put and be out of sight, but hunger chased us out of hiding. The open fields of the countryside were our main source of food. We thought it pointless to walk towards the front lines in the north and were afraid to walk south, which seemed to be dangerous. We couldn't stay away from the highways or we would be isolated and lose touch with daily events. It seemed a good idea to return to the house where we had slept in the stable. When we were approaching a house the previous day, a woman came out with a white sheet in her hand. She was going to hang it as a flag and said, without emotions, "The Americans

are coming" - as simple as that.

Young, good looking, healthy American soldiers greeted us with warm smiles. The highway came alive again, was flooded with people. Victims....., prisoners....came out of their hiding places. There were French politicals, Russian prisoners of war, Jews from Hungary, african negroes all of them fugitives who had been candidates for death. It was a colourful, carefree, cavalcade of happy people, their despair and concern vanished within minutes.

It was the 27th March 1945.

UNCERTAINTY.

During the first two weeks as free humans again in Frielandorf, West Germany, we were accommodated in the local kindergarten before being transferred to a hotel.

While we were living in the kindergarten, we were given a half venison by an american soldier. He did not say how he got it or where. Perhaps hunting was his hobby, but it was hard to imagine that in the middle of the war. The venison made several different dishes, boiled for soup, baked, made into sweet and sour dishes, etc. That night, seated at the little table, we had a feast. It was like a dream ,or as if we were in a child's story. But the next day we were punished for our indulgence. Everyone was sick with diarrhoea, which passed eventually, but was severe. Many young lives were lost as a result of sudden over eating after prolonged starvation.

Once we were wakened in the middle of the night by the thunderous sound of vehicles being driven through town. It sounded like heavy artillery and went on hour after hour.

We were all awake, but lay silent,
listening, not knowing what the others
were thinking, and not wanting to
frighten each other. But our worries
grew by the minute, as the driving
went on and on. It was awful! What if
the Americans left us behind?

It was curfew! How would they
know that we were there when we
couldn't go out and tell them?

Such thoughts went through our
minds over and over again holding us
frozen with fear It was a horrible
night.

Next day we learnt that all the
noise and movement had been only the
reorganisation of war equipment!

★ ★

PRESENT FROM BUCHENWALD

Our standard of living was reasonably improved with the appearance of the Americans. We were moved into one of the local hotels and had real beds, real bathrooms, and our meals were served in the hotel dining room.

The most memorable event that happened to me was when the names of Hungarian prisoners from Buchenwald were circulated .Three persons out of our group of one thousand found their brothers' names on the list.

I was one of the lucky ones.

A committee formed to represent our group, arranged for us to get together. Everyone in the guest house waited impatiently for the day when Laci was supposed to arrive. I was on top of the world. I felt privileged and someone special, to find a sibling so far away from home. I cannot describe the feelings I had when I saw him. He had grown into a suntanned, freckle-faced ,blue-eyed, blond, healthy-looking, strong teenager.

Laci was sixteen years old, full of life, daring and reckless. I worried myself sick constantly when he was out of my sight. My possessiveness toward him was almost abnormal. Or did I have a psychic notion about his future? I did not know.

Unfortunately, when we were transferred home, Laci fell ill with frequent headaches on the way back. On the third day of our arrival he became paralysed. The cause of his paralysis was never established. Eventually he learnt to walk again, and went through painful treatments for three years before it was realised that no further improvement was possible. He was crippled for life. His happy, well-balanced, sunny nature helped him to start a new life in his new condition. He is capable of looking after himself, able to work as an invalid, and thoroughly enjoys his work and what life can offer him.

Laci told us that he had worked until January 1945 at Auschwitz in the I.G. Farben factory named Buna. He was in the death march on that January night when the white snow on both sides of the road was speckled with red blood, and those who were not able to keep up with the brisk marching were shot

on the spot. The survivors were placed in open carriages at Gleiwitz, 100-180 person per wagon. A week later when they arrived at Buchenwald, they were sitting on frozen corpses.

One afternoon at Buchenwald, Laci told us, the Jews were called to the square for "Zahl-Appell". Without the usual rigmarole they were ordered to face and march through the camp gate on the way to Dachau. My brother ran out of the line, was noticed and a bullet was fired but missed him. A hand pulled him inside a barrack and he was hidden there by French political prisoners - under a blanket - when his pursuers searched for him.

Now he is living in Israel where my older brother, Sanyi, also lives with his family. Sanyi was liberated in East Germany not long before the war ended, and a little more than a year later he was smuggled out of Hungary on his way to Israel on the Exodus. He spent 12 months on Cyprus before he reached the shores of Haifa, as a member of the Palmach. He fought in three wars and now, as he is retired, his three sons replace him in the army.

EPILOG

Let me say that what I have learnt in the days I have described is still valid today. Love and hate are still the most powerful forces motivating our lives. I hope the time will come when the mind will transcend feeling. When we all realise that it makes no difference what the colour of our skin may be or what religion we follow, because one is not better than another just different.

We were victims who were privileged to survive. We are survivors, yet still victims. As Horace Walpole said: "Life is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel".

Unfortunately I am one of those who feels.

★ ★

GLOSSARY

Ady Endre	Hungarian poet
Aufseherine	Lager overseer
Allendorf	German village
Auschwitz	Village in Poland with concentration lagers, gaschambers & crematoriums
Birkenau	Annihilating camps near Auschwitz
Blockalteste	Barrack supervisor
Buna	Rubber factory
Capo	Supervisor selected from from prisoners
Durgemuse	vegetable soup - water and turnip -
Fernichtungs Lager	Annihilating camp
Furstalle	Armament-factory
Frielendorf	village staged af- ter liberation
Hauptsharfuhrer	Rank in the SS
I.G.Farben	German chemical firm
Jozsef Attila	Hungarian poet
Kamanec-Podolyski	place in Poland, thousands were kil- led on open.
Kiss Jozsef	Hungarian poet
Kolozsvar	Ex Hungarian town, annexed to Romania
Lager Alteste	Camp supervisor

Michalovce	Prev.Nagy Mihaly,ex Hungarian town,now in Slovakia
Revier	Hospital in camp
SS	Elite Military Poli- ce in Naci Germany
Stubendienst	Room Eldest
Untersharfuhrer	Lower rank in army
Wehrmacht	German Army
Zahl-Appell	Roll call
